

# The new WPA Educational Program on Personality Disorders

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Few problems in the field of psychiatry are more complex to address than personality disorders. The dilemma starts, in fact, with trying to decide what is personality, and how we understand the influences that determine the mature personality. Contemporary views assume a complex interaction between genetic factors, with a present emphasis on temperament, and life experiences. While most believe that what will become the mature personality is, for most people, essentially determined by late adolescence, we know that a variety of factors can exert modifying effects throughout the life cycle. Thus, the conceptualization that personality reflects a matrix of

qualities of character and patterns of reactivity has become generally accepted, though still difficult to quantify.

Moving from a general framework of understanding to a definition of specific aspects of personality has, therefore, been difficult. This leads to one of the most complex issues in our field, which is the differentiation of normal from abnormal personality. It is within this area of inquiry that the definition of personality disorders lies. Complicating this definition is the fact that not only genetic heritage and life experiences exert influences on personality development, but a wide range of cultural and ethnic variables also play a substantial, though thus far not quantifiable, role.

If, given all of the dilemmas enumerated above, we can arrive at a consen-

sus about what is a personality disorder, this leads to the next dilemma of how we can best assess personality disorders. There is little agreement in this area, best conceptualized through the ongoing debate about whether the diagnosis of personality disorders should occur within a dimensional or categorical approach. A further complication arises due to the fact that advocates for either categorical or dimensional approaches have thus far not reached a consensus on the optimal approach even within their own domain of study.

Finally, how to treat something defined as a disorder, but which is embedded in the person of the individual seeking treatment, and thus not easily amenable to modification, remains one of the most complex clinical problems in the field of psychiatry. The conceptual and diagnostic dilemmas have made research in the area of treatment of personality disorders quite difficult, and comparisons across studies are difficult

to make. An additional level of complexity occurs because we well know that personality disorders and other psychiatric disorders often co-exist, but unfortunately not in ways which lead us to easy construction of frameworks for treatment planning. Molecular genetics holds out the promise that, if we identify genetic predispositions for a variety of psychiatric illnesses, we can use this knowledge to develop more effective treatments for them. Few would suggest a similar likely outcome in the area of personality disorders.

Our task, then, is to provide state-of-the-art information which can be used by clinicians at any stage of training in understanding personality disorders and developing a treatment plan. This monumental task has been handled with aplomb by the workgroup respon-

sible for the preparation of the new WPA Educational Program on Personality Disorders, which is now available on the WPA website ([www.wpanet.org](http://www.wpanet.org)).

Calling upon an outstanding group of experts in all aspects of personality studies around the globe, Eric Simonson and colleagues have produced a work that is comprehensive, yet organized in a way that makes access to the material easy for individuals at any stage of their professional career. Their work is an excellent illustration of ways in which the WPA can productively collaborate with other international organizations, in this case the International Society on the Study of Personality Disorders (ISSPD).

The work is designed in three modules. Module 1 reviews the scholarly contributions to our understanding of

personality and how we might classify personality and personality disorders, and summarizes a variety of therapeutic management approaches. Module 2 addresses each personality disorder and reviews diagnostic criteria, etiology, epidemiology, comorbidity, and treatment. Module 3 presents a "casebook" to illustrate the range of personality disorders. The vignettes are concise, yet illustrative, and accompanied by expert commentaries. Recommended readings and curricular recommendations also are included for all three modules.

While no one work can possibly encompass the entire field of personality disorders, and whether the reader is interested in a specific topic or an in-depth review, there is little question that time spent with this material will be universally felt to be very useful.